



HERBS AND HORMONAL BALANCE

There's an old saying that "everything old is new again," and so it has always been with herbal medicine. For centuries, native populations have known that certain plants have incredible healing properties. We take a look at how researchers are returning to these ancient discoveries to determine optimal dosages and test their effectiveness. One area that has drawn the attention of scientists is how to use combinations of powerful plant extracts to restore hormonal balance. And for women suffering from hot flashes, mood swings, night sweats, foggy thinking, and insomnia, the news is good! Phytotherapeutic options are becoming more popular because they aren't known to generate the same side effects as other, less-natural options. Before you decide how to deal with your own symptoms, read more about why plant-based therapy may be the best starting place.

Many women are afraid to try herbal remedies because they're uncertain about safety. They think that because a pharmaceutical drug has been studied in a laboratory and prescribed by a doctor, it has to be safe. But the truth is that there are many adverse reactions to prescription drugs, and at Elementa we believe that both orthodox and complementary medicines have a part to play - but there are so many ways to heal our bodies naturally and with fewer side effects, especially when we take a closer look at the plant world.

Phytotherapy — the use of medicinal plants to heal and restore balance — is an age-old tradition. Plants hold truly amazing healing properties and some of the most exciting research is being done around how plants can act to naturally balance hormones. As we learn more about the underlying mechanisms of phytotherapy, science has been able to increase its effectiveness, while maintaining the gentle side effect profile herbal remedies are known for.

When you look at the numbers, it's clear that the majority of the world's population today relies on botanical medicine and a plant-based diet for survival. But in NZ there continues to be so much fear around efficacy, safety and regulation. Let's take a closer look at phytotherapy and how it can gently and effectively restore health and hormonal balance.

What is phytotherapy?

Phytotherapy is the use of plants, either in whole food form or in the form of standardized extracts and supplements, for healing purposes. Its roots trace all the way back to the beginnings of time and still stand strong in much of the world today.

It's not surprising that the study of plants for medicinal purposes led to what we now know as pharmaceuticals. Most of the drugs conventional practitioners prescribe today have roots in the plant world. The difference is that pharmaceutical companies change the chemical structure of the compound not only to specialise and magnify its actions, but also to patent the medication and sell it as their unique product. Since plants found in nature can be used and sold by everyone, phytotherapy is more accessible to the general world. It is also, in most cases, much gentler on our bodies than pharmaceutical medications.

What we at Elementa like about phytotherapy is that it's used to *prevent* health concerns as well as *treat* them. Sadly, conventional medicine has moved into the dangerous habit of treating symptoms as they arise instead of looking at an individual's whole health picture. Phytotherapy uses cell signaling to affect our bodies early on in the processes of disease and imbalance, which is ultimately far less disruptive to the system. For this reason the results often last longer. What's particularly fascinating is the way phytotherapy works in conjunction with the endocrine system.

It's amazing that plants can interact so intimately with the hormones we make in our bodies. But if you think about it, we evolved alongside the plant world. So it makes sense that our bodies are fluent in their language. The other important aspect of phytotherapy is that the cells of your body and the plant molecules can communicate — which separates this kind of therapy from many prescription drugs.

The adaptogenic effect — a more efficient and safe way to restore balance

In communicating with the plant molecules in herbal therapies, your body can oftentimes get what it needs — and only what it needs. Instead of slamming the system with large doses of medication — what I call the sledgehammer effect — your cells talk to the plant molecule upstream of the disease process to communicate what and how much they need. We call this an *adaptogenic effect*, meaning our bodies can respond to and use plant molecules in various ways, depending on how much and in what proportions we have of our own hormones on board and how smoothly we're regulating and metabolizing them. So there is an astounding back-and-forth dynamic between plant cells and human cells that a man-made substance could never mimic.

Stronger pharmaceutical drugs do their work later, or “downstream” in the physiological process, leaving little to no opportunity for the body to communicate its needs. This can sometimes leave the body with too much or too little of the hormone or medication on board, which can ultimately leave the body more vulnerable.

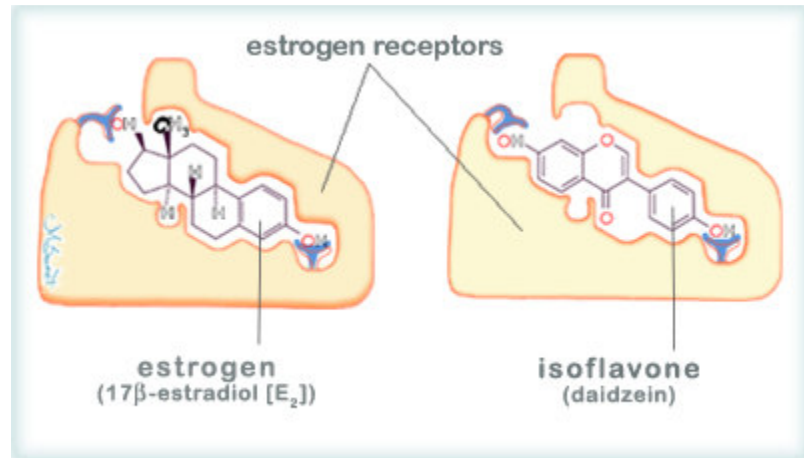
Think about caring for a house plant. If you had a set amount of water to give your plant every time it

needed water, on certain days it would most likely end up with too much or too little. Plants, like our cells, are living things and depending on the air, the sun and the soil they're growing in, they may need more or less water on any given day. These factors, like our own internal and external environments, are constantly changing. We can grow healthy plants when we water them based on their needs, and they communicate those needs to us by how much water they suck in or let pool above the soil, by the texture and color of their leaves. It's a give and take process, depending on the plant, as opposed to a standard “prescription.” Phytotherapy works in a similar way with our bodies. Like the plant caretaker, it watches and listens to our cells to gauge what is needed so your body has the right amount of the hormone in need.

Phytotherapy and menopause

At Elementa we use the healing power of herbs to safely help women with hormonal imbalances. Especially when layered overtop a foundation of healthy lifestyle and dietary choices, phytotherapy can gently help women reverse hormonal imbalance and maintain better equilibrium in menopause. With its adaptogenic effects, phytotherapy can help normalize, strengthen, and protect your system from many stressful events in menopause.

Using herbs for menopause isn't a new concept. Many herbs have been used traditionally for decades and in some cases centuries to address menopausal symptoms. Although many of the traditionally used plants lack clinical studies for this purpose, the empirical evidence and tradition is strong.



The adaptogenic effect

By weakly binding to the estrogen receptors (represented in orange), phytoestrogens such as the isoflavone daidzein (shown R) can block the negative effects of excess estrogen; alternately, when levels decline, they can “stand in” for the estradiol molecule (shown L) to moderate the negative effects of low estrogen.

Here are some of the plants that have been widely used for menopausal symptoms.

Black cohosh (*Actaea racemosa*) a plant native to Eastern North America, has been used by women all over the world for generations to help with hormonal balance. It is thought to act as a functional mimetic, primarily by binding to opioid receptors in the brain to affect tissues in the body.

Red clover (*Trifolium pratense*) is rich in phytoestrogens including lignans, coumestans, and isoflavones. As I described above, isoflavones can weakly bind to estrogen receptors in the body. This makes red clover a helpful herb for menopausal symptoms.

Chastetree (*Vitex agnus-castus*) has active molecules that may affect our neurotransmitters, particularly dopamine, which acts in the brain and other parts of the body. Recent studies are showing that properties of this herb may mimic the soothing actions of progesterone.

Kudzu (*Pueraria lobata*) is a member of the pea family and is native to Asia. Much like red clover, it contains phytochemicals that function in a protective fashion. These include five major isoflavanoids that can bind weakly to estrogen receptors, quieting the body's need for estrogen during times of hormonal imbalance

Passionflower (*Passiflora incarnata*) has strong Native American roots and contains natural monoamine oxidase inhibitors (MAOI's), which are known to have antidepressant and anti-anxiety properties.

Ashwagandha (*Withania somnifera*) is an herb with aphrodisiac and mood-stabilizing properties. Recent studies suggest this Ayurvedic herb can act in an adaptogenic fashion when androgen levels are low, activating the hypothalamic-pituitary-gonadal axis to increase the production of androgens.

Wild yam (*Dioscorea villosa*) is native to North America and has been used for both menopause and menstrual-related symptoms. Research suggests that it acts as a functional mimetic of progesterone.

Returning the power to your hands

At Elementa, we spend whatever time it takes with our patients and find that individualized medicine works best. A trial of gentle phytotherapy may offer a woman the chance to naturally find her own balance in health.

Here are some guidelines to using herbal medicine that our patients have found helpful along the way:

- **Know your body.** We are all different, and there is a subset of the population (upwards of 30–40%) who detox at a slower rate than the rest of the population. This group is generally highly sensitive to most

- therapeutic agents and needs a lighter dosage. If this is something you've learned about yourself, honor that and vary your dosages accordingly.
- **Monitor your progress.** Though negative interactions and side effects are relatively sparse with herbal remedies (most of the truly harmful herbs have been eliminated from the herbal pharmacopoeia), we always recommend monitoring yourself carefully when trying any new therapy.
 - **Don't take herbs and drugs in the same sitting.** This can change the rate at which a drug is absorbed. In other words, take them at different times of the day, and ask your healthcare practitioner if you need to know what time to take your regular medications. Always be sure to update your healthcare practitioner on what you are taking.
 - **Look for standardized extracts.** Although some may argue that using standardized extracts takes away some of the whole-herb qualities and strays from the roots of herbal medicine, we feel that standardized extracts can help decrease some of the unpredictability of using plants for healing.
 - **In diversity there is strength.** Finding a herbal remedy that combines a range of plant constituents, like the one we offer in our clinic and programmes.
 - **Have patience.** In most cases, using herbal remedies takes time to build up an effect in the body. This is because they do their gentle work at the source of the imbalance and it may take time to heal metabolic pathways that have been off-balance for many years.

What can I do to get back in balance?

Elementa Hormonal balance programme is a great place to start

The hormonal balance programme promotes natural hormonal balance. You start with an in house or telephone consultation with a naturopath followed by the appropriate nutritional supplements, herbal support formula, dietary and lifestyle guidance, and optional follow-up consultations. Call us on 09 520 4015 for more information.

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